On Left and Right, Consensus Support for Immigration Reform
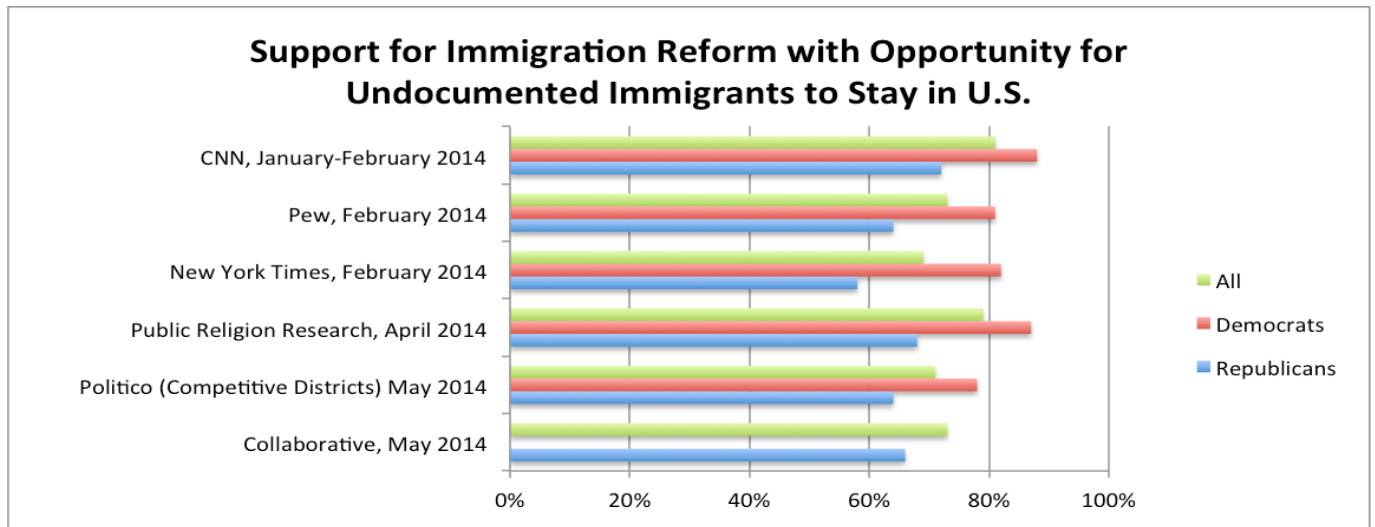
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Introduction

A year after the passage in the Senate of sweeping immigration reform legislation, the House has yet to act on immigration reform or any piece of reform. The Senate approach has been disparaged by House Republican leaders who have repeatedly stated they will not take up the Senate's bill. Instead, they've stated a preference for a "piecemeal" approach. While a number of bills have passed through committees, none has been taken up on the floor of the House, and no bill has been considered in committee that tackles the big question of what to do with undocumented immigrants.

Meanwhile, the American public has consistently supported immigration reform similar to that outlined in the bipartisan Senate plan, which includes a path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants. Dozens of polls have asked the public—and more specifically the voting public—what should be done about undocumented immigrants. When pollsters describe an approach similar to what was included in Senate legislation, a majority of respondents, time and again, have said they favor the approach. Specifically, the public favors allowing undocumented immigrants to gain legal status and eventually apply for citizenship **if** certain conditions are met—learning English, paying taxes, no criminal history, etc.

On this point, the partisan divide in Congress is greater than it is in the general public. Democrats, Republicans, and Independents favor a conditional path to legal status or citizenship for undocumented immigrants. There are loud and passionate voices that want nothing other than mass deportation for undocumented immigrants, but those voices are a minority and do not reflect public consensus.

Following is a discussion of the public's answers to questions about the treatment of undocumented immigrants. These questions have been included in national and regional polls

going back months. This paper will include only those polls conducted immediately prior to the passage of Senate legislation up to the present time, and includes some polls focusing exclusively on Republican or Hispanic voters.

- **Basswood Research** (June 11, 2014, of 400 voters who voted in the June 10 Republican primary election in Virginia's 7th congressional district): When House Majority Leader Eric Cantor was defeated in the primary for his reelection bid, many commentators believed the immigration issue was partly or largely to blame, with Cantor's primary opponent, David Brat, pledging to oppose "amnesty." This survey of voters, commissioned by Americans for a Conservative Direction, revealed that immigration was not an important issue to them. Among those who voted for Brat, 22% cited immigration as the main reason for their vote. Given a list of five Obama administration policies and **asked which they thought was most harmful to America, only 4% picked immigration**.

  These voters were also asked,

  > "Do you support or oppose an immigration reform proposal that would … secure the border with significantly more border patrol agents and fences, crack down on employers who hire illegal immigrants, and allow the 11 million illegal immigrants who are currently in America to have a pathway to becoming U.S. citizens, only after they meet certain requirements, including passing a criminal background check, paying a fine, learning English, and waiting a period of years?"

  Even among those who voted for Brat, there is 69% support for such a proposal, not much different than the 72.5% of all these voters who support such a proposal.

- **Public Policy Polling** (June 10, 2014, of 488 voters in Virginia's 7th congressional district): This more general survey of voters in Virginia's 7th district also found majority support for immigration reform in the district. Reform legislation now before Congress was described (including "eligibility for a path to citizenship" after "a long list of requirements is met over more than a decade"). **A strong majority (72%) said they supported that plan, including 70% of Republicans**.

- **Collaborative Survey with 10 Republican Polling Firms** (May 17 to 23, 2014, of 800 registered voters nationwide, with an oversample of 505 Republican voters. Also May 27 to June 1 of Hispanic registered voters nationwide): In the survey of registered voters, respondents were asked for their opinion about how undocumented immigrants should be treated. **By more than a three to one margin, most thought undocumented immigrants should be allowed to stay**, rather than being "sent back to their home country," with 41% saying "they should eventually be allowed to apply for citizenship," and 32% saying "they should be allowed to apply for legal status but not citizenship." Only 22% said undocumented immigrants should be deported.

  Results were not much different for those identifying themselves as "tea party" Republicans, "conservative" Republicans, or "strong" Republicans. By a two to one margin, these voters preferred allowing undocumented immigrants to

stay rather than being forced to return home. Among these groups, legal status without citizenship is slightly preferred over allowing immigrants to eventually become citizens.

Among Hispanic voters, 83% said they considered immigration reform to be "very important" (56%) or "somewhat important" (27%) when determining who to vote for in Congress. 88% said they believe undocumented immigrants should be allowed to stay, and among those voters there is a slight preference for allowing undocumented immigrants to become citizens (47%) verses legal status without citizenship (41%)

When asked who is to blame for Congress' failure to pass immigration reform in the past few years, Hispanic voters were far more likely to blame Republicans (49%) verses Democrats (11%) or the president (11%). These voters were also asked whether they would be more likely to listen to what Republicans in Congress had to say on other issues if Republicans supported immigration reform. The answer illustrates why immigration is considered a gateway issue: 76% of respondents said they would be more likely to give congressional Republicans a second chance if they supported immigration reform. Only 20% said they would not.

- **Center for American Progress Action Fund/Latino Decisions Immigration Poll** (May 16 to 23, 2014, of 800 Latino registered voters): Another survey aimed at taking the temperature of Latino voters on immigration reform and the debate in Congress, this one found that 66% of respondents said they were "very closely" or "somewhat closely" paying attention to the debate. Most (**89%) said that it is important that Congress address immigration reform before the next election**. Should immigration reform not pass this year, respondents said they would blame Republicans over Democrats by a **three to one margin**. On the other hand, if Republicans support immigration reform with a path to citizenship, nearly two-thirds of respondents (**61%**) said they would be more likely to listen to Republican ideas on other issues.

- **Politico** (May 2 to 13, 2014, of 867 likely voters in states and districts with the most competitive Senate and House races): This survey asked voters if they "support or oppose comprehensive immigration reform," without describing conditions included in the Senate legislation—conditions that that generally raise positive response. Still, the total supporting reform in this survey was **71%**, including **64%** of Republicans, **71%** of independents and **78%** of Democrats.)

- **McLaughlin & Associates** (May 9 to 12, 2014, of 400 Republican primary voters nationwide who said they identify "strongly" or "somewhat" with the tea party movement): This survey identified voters **who identified with the concerns of the tea party**, then asked them their opinion about immigration reform. The results were consistent with other polls conducted earlier in the year. A plan with content similar to parts of the Senate bill was described, and a strong majority—**more than 75%—said they supported such a plan**. These Republican voters were also asked if they would rather vote for a candidate for Congress who focuses exclusively on border security and enforcement, or for a candidate who

"...supports broad immigration reform that would increase border security and a way for undocumented immigrants who are already in this country to stay in this country if they pay penalties, pay back taxes, pass a criminal background check and learn English and American civics."

Consistent with their preference for immigration reform that includes a way to deal with the undocumented, **69% said they would prefer a candidate who supports broad reform**.

When given the choice between deporting all undocumented immigrant, allowing them to gain legal status but never citizenship or allowing them to eventually gain citizenship (provided they meet certain conditions), **respondents favored allowing undocumented immigrants to stay by nearly a two to one margin**, but were evenly split between citizenship 35.5% and legal status with no citizenship (34.2%).

When asked how important it was to them that Congress act this year on immigration reform, **seven in ten respondents said it was "very" or "somewhat" important to them**.

- **Public Opinion Strategies** (May 6, 2014, of 400 past and present Republican primary voters in North Carolina's 2nd congressional district): The incumbent in this district, Renee Ellmers, has expressed support for immigration reform and won her primary. This survey found that **71% of Republican primary voters in the district support a reform plan** that includes "improved border security and enforcement, as well as a way for the undocumented immigrants who are already in this country to stay in this country, IF they pay penalties, pay back taxes, and learn English." A majority of voters (**67%) also said they would rather vote for a candidate who supports such a plan**.

- **Public Religion Research Institute** (April 7 to 27, 2014, call back survey of 1,534 adults nationwide): The Public Religion Research Institute, in partnership with the Brookings Institution, called back the same adults surveyed a year ago, to gauge changes in public opinion on a range of issues. The conclusion (as this paper also highlights) was that the public supports a path to citizenship, and it has consistently done so throughout the current congressional debate on immigration reform. In 2014, **79%** of respondents felt that immigrants "currently living in the U.S. illegally" should be allowed either to "become citizens provided they meet certain requirements" or to "become permanent legal residents, but not citizens." A year ago, the total was 77%. A path to citizenship is the preferred option, with 62% support.

A report accompanying the survey breaks down attitudes by various characteristics, including political affiliation. As with other surveys mentioned in this paper, this survey finds that allowing undocumented immigrants to stay and become either citizens or permanent residents is **supported by Democrats (87%), Independents (77%), Republicans (68%) and even supporters of the tea party (60%)**. The report finds that the biggest predictor of opposition to immigration reform is trust in Fox News. Interestingly, Fox News, like other major media outlets, does its own public opinion surveys, and those surveys are consistent with all the others. (For example, this survey

found 68% support for a path to citizenship, including 60% support among Republicans.)

- **New York Times/CBS News** (February 19 to 23, 2014, of 1,644 adults nationwide): This poll asked the question:

  > Which comes closes to your view about illegal immigrants who are living in the U.S.? 1. They should be allowed to stay in the U.S. and eventually apply for citizenship. 2. They should be allowed to stay in the U.S. legally, but not be allowed to apply for citizenship or 3. They should be required to leave the U.S.

  Overall, a substantial majority, **69%, said that "illegal immigrants" should be allowed to stay**. Preference for allowing immigrants to stay crossed party lines. A majority of Republicans (**58%**), and strong majorities of Democrats (**82%**) and Independents (**69%**) supported that option. Overall, allowing immigrants to apply for citizenship was favored (**53%**) over allowing them to stay without having the chance to become citizens (**16%**).

- **Pew Research Center** (February 14 to 23, 2014, of 1,821 adults, including an oversample of young adults aged 18 to 33): Respondents were asked: "Which comes closer to your view about how to handle undocumented immigrants who are now living in the U.S.? Should they not be allowed to stay in the country legally, or should there be a way for those who meet certain requirements to stay in the country legally?" Overall, **73% said they should be allowed to stay**, including **81%** of Democrats, **74%** of independents, **64%** of Republicans, **61%** of "conservative Republicans" and **56%** of tea party supporters.

  Respondents were given a choice between allowing undocumented immigrants to gain citizenship (46%) verses legal status without citizenship (24% favoring that option). Even among conservative Republicans, citizenship status was preferred (31% to 27%). Only among those who said they identified with the tea party was there a slightly greater preference for legal status without citizenship—28% to 25%.

- **University of Texas/Texas Tribune** (February 7 to 17, 2014, of 1,200 registered voters in Texas): This survey of Texas voters found a majority supports comprehensive immigration reform:

  > "Do you support or oppose passing a comprehensive immigration overhaul at the federal level that would provide a pathway to citizenship for most illegal immigrants currently living in the United States?"

  Overall, **51%** said they "strongly support" or "somewhat support" immigration reform. The pollsters note that support for immigration reform has increased by six percent among Texas voters since the question was asked in October 2013.

- **Gallup Poll** (February 6 to 9, 2014, of 1,023 adults nationwide): This poll included a question asking Americans how important it was to them that the government took steps this year to deal with 1) "controlling U.S. borders to halt the flow of illegal immigrants into

the U.S.," and 2) "developing a plan to deal with the large number of illegal immigrants who are already living in the U.S." **For the first time since Gallup began asking that question, an equal number of Americans felt it was "extremely important" to deal with the current undocumented population (44%) as it was to deal with border security (43%)**. While 56% of Republicans said it was "extremely important" to secure the border, this represents **a decline of 12%** since Gallup asked that question in 2011, and is consistent with a similar drop in concern about border security among Democrats and Independents.

- **Basswood Research and GlobalStrategyGroup** (February 3 to 5, 2014, of 800 likely general election voters plus an additional 200 oversample of Republican voters): This survey found that there was **64% support overall** for "providing a pathway to citizenship for the estimated 11 million undocumented immigrants presently in the country." **Among Republicans, there was 50% support**, but when the proposal is described in more detail, support goes up:

  > "Some people are proposing that we provide a 13-year pathway to citizenship for undocumented immigrants presently in the country, as long as they meet requirements such as passing a background check, learning English, and paying fines and back taxes."

  When described this way (more closely matching the Senate's legislation), **support among Republicans rose to 64%**, and **overall support rose to 71%**.

- **CNN/ORC International** (January 31 to February 2, 2014, of 1,010 adults, including 900 voters nationwide): This poll included the following question:

  > "Here are some questions about how the U.S. government should treat illegal immigrants who have been in this country for a number of years, hold a job, speak English and are willing to pay any back taxes that they owe. Would you favor or oppose a bill that allowed those immigrants to stay in this country rather than being deported and eventually allow them to apply for U.S. citizenship?"

  Overall, **81% of respondents said they favored such a plan**. Only 17% were opposed. Support extended across party and ideological lines. Nearly **three-quarters (72%) of Republicans** said they supported the plan, compared to 88% of Democrats and 81% of independents. Of those who said they were conservative, **75% supported** the plan. Even 72% of those who said they were tea party supporters said they supported allowing undocumented immigrants to stay here and eventually apply for citizenship. There was not much difference among age groups. Among 18- to 34-year olds, support was 88%, while among those 65 and older, support was 80%.

Earlier Polls

- **Fox News** (January 19 to 21, 2014, of 1,010 registered voters nationwide): "Which of the following comes closest to your view about what government policy should be toward illegal immigrants currently in the United States?" (Allow illegal immigrants to remain in

the country and eventually qualify for US citizenship, but only if they meet certain requirements like paying back taxes, learning English, and passing a background check: **68%**)

- **CBS News** (January 17 to 21, 2014, of 1,018 adults nationwide): "Which comes closest to your view about illegal immigrants who are living in the U.S.?" (They should be allowed to stay in the U.S. and eventually apply for citizenship: **54%**)

- **Quinnipiac University** (November 6 to 11, 2013, of 2,545 registered voters nationwide): "Which comes closest to your view about illegal immigrants who are currently living in the United States?" (They should be allowed to stay in the United States and to eventually apply for U.S. citizenship: **57%**)

- **Public Religion Research Institute** (November 6 to 10, 2013, of 1,005 adults nationwide): "Which statement comes closest to your view about how the immigration system should deal with immigrants who are currently living in the U.S. illegally?" (Allow them a way to become citizens provided they meet certain requirements: **63%**)

- **CBS News** (October 18 to 21, 2013, of 1,007 adults nationwide): "Would you favor or oppose providing a path to citizenship for illegal immigrants in the U.S. if they met certain requirements including a waiting period, paying fines and back taxes, passing criminal background checks, and learning English?" (Support: **77%**)

- **Quinnipiac University** (July 28 to 31, 2013, of 1,468 registered voters): "As you may know, the U.S. Senate recently voted to pass legislation reforming the immigration system. The bill would allow illegal immigrants already in the country to become citizens after 13 years if they pay a fine and learn English. The bill would also double the number of border patrol agents, and double the amount of fencing along the Mexican border. In general, do you support or oppose this bill? (Support: **64%**)

- **Public Policy Polling** (July 26 to 27, 2013, of 700 registered voters): "There is bipartisan immigration reform legislation being debated in Washington. The bill would secure our borders, block employers from hiring undocumented immigrants, and make sure that undocumented immigrants already in the U.S. with no criminal record register for legal status. If a long list of requirements is met over more than a decade, it provides eligibility for a path to citizenship. Would you support or oppose this proposal?" (Total support: **73%**)

- **America's Voice/Latino Decisions** (July 20 to 23, 2013, of 800 Latino voters in 24 competitive congressional districts represented by incumbent Republicans): "Congress is considering different ideas to include in the immigration reform bill. ... One plan would increase border security and enforcement of our existing immigration laws, require employers to verify that all employees have legal status, and provide a pathway to citizenship for undocumented immigrants, as long as they pass a background check, study English, and pay a fine. Do you strongly support, somewhat support, somewhat oppose, or strongly oppose this immigration plan?" (Total support: **78%**)

- **CBS News** (July 18 to 22, 2013, of 1,036 adults): "Would you favor or oppose providing a path to citizenship for illegal immigrants in the U.S. if they met certain requirements

including a waiting period, paying fines and back taxes, passing criminal background checks, and learning English? (Favor: **78%**)

- **Washington Post/ABC News** (July 10 to 14, 2013, of 1,004 adults): "Overall, do you support or oppose a path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants now living in the United States?" (Support: **55%**)

- **United Technologies/National Journal Congressional Connection** (July 11 to 14, 2013, of 1,002 adults): "As you may know, the U.S. Senate recently voted to pass legislation reforming the immigration system. The bill would double the number of border patrol agents, double the amount of fencing along the Mexican border, and allow immigrants who came to the U.S. illegally to become citizens after 13 years if they pay a fine and learn English. The House of Representatives is now considering what to do with this bill. Which describes what you would like the House to do?" (Eliminate the provisions providing citizenship for illegal immigrants and then pass the bill: **13%**)

- **Latino Decisions and Hart Research** (July 8 to 12, 2013, of 600 Latino voters): "In your opinion, how high a priority should it be for Congress to pass immigration reform legislation that includes an earned path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants?" (High or very high priority: **69%**)

- **Quinnipiac University** (June 28 to July 8, 2013, of 2,014 registered voters): "Which comes closest to your view about illegal immigrants who are currently living in the United States? A) They should be allowed to stay in the United States and to eventually apply for US citizenship. B) They should be allowed to remain in the United States, but not be allowed to apply for U.S. citizenship. C) They should be required to leave the U.S." (Should be allowed to stay in U.S. and apply for citizenship: **54%**)

- **Basswood Research** (July 8, 2013, of 1,000 voters with a history of voting in Republican primaries) Among the key findings of this poll: **65%** of Republican voters support a pathway to citizenship for illegal immigrants if it is coupled with substantially increased border security, and another **8%** support a pathway to citizenship even without extra border security.

- **Public Policy Polling** (July 5 – 7, 2013, of varying number of voters in seven competitive congressional districts in California, Colorado, Minnesota, Nevada and New York): "Do you support or oppose an immigration reform plan that ensures undocumented immigrants currently living in the U.S. pay a penalty, learn English, pass a criminal background check, pay taxes, and wait a minimum of thirteen years before they can be eligible for citizenship?" (Support: ranging from a high of **77%** in California's 21st Congressional district to a low of **65%** in California's 31st district)

- **Gallup Poll** (June 13 – July 5, 2013, of 4,373 adults): "Would you favor or oppose each of the following as part of legislation to address the issue of illegal immigration?" (Allowing illegal immigrants to become citizens: **88%**)

- **Gallup Poll** (June 15 – 16, 2013, of 1,015 adults): "Would you vote for or against a law that would allow illegal immigrants living in the U.S. the opportunity to become citizens after a long waiting period if they paid taxes and a penalty, pass a criminal background check, and learn English?" (Vote for: **87%**)

- **United Technologies/National Journal Congressional Connection Poll** (June 13 – 16, 2013, of 1,004 adults): "Which comes closer to your view about how to handle immigrants who are now living in the U.S. illegally?" (There should be a way for those who meet certain requirements to stay in the country legally: **71%**)

- **Pew Research Center and USA Today Poll** (June 12 – 16, 2013, of 1,512 adults): "Which comes closer to your view about how to handle undocumented immigrants who are now living in the U.S.?" (There should be a way for them to stay in the country legally, if certain requirements are met: **71%**)

- **CNN/ORC International Poll** (June 11 – 13, 2013, of 1,014 adults): "The U.S. Senate is considering an immigration bill that would attempt to increase border security and create a path to citizenship for many immigrants who are in this country without permission from the U.S. government. Based on what you have read or heard about this bill, do you favor or oppose it?" (Favor: **51%**)

- **Fox News Poll** (June 9 – 11, 2013, of 1,019 registered voters): "Do you favor or oppose allowing the 11 million illegal immigrants currently in the country to remain in the country and eventually -- years down the road -- qualify for U.S. citizenship, as long as they meet certain requirements like paying back taxes, learning English, and passing a background check?" (Support: **74%**)

- **Alliance for Citizenship, Partnership for a New American Economy and Republicans for Immigration Reform Poll** (June 2 – 10, 2013, of 500 or more likely voters in each of 29 states): "Do you support or oppose an immigration reform plan that ensures undocumented immigrants currently living in the U.S. pay a penalty, learn English, pass a criminal background check, pay taxes, and wait a minimum of thirteen years before they can be eligible for citizenship?" (Support across 29 states: **72%**)

- **Bloomberg Poll** (May 31 – June 2, 2013, of 1,002 adults): "For each of the following elements that might be part of a new law, please tell me if you favor or oppose it as part of an immigration bill: Allowing Immigrant living in the country illegally to become citizens, provided they don't have criminal records, they pay fines and back taxes, and they wait more than 10 years." (Support: **74%**)

- **NBC News-Wall Street Journal Poll** (May 30 – June 2, 2013, of 1,000 adults): "If a proposed pathway to citizenship allowed foreigner staying illegally in the United States the opportunity to eventually become legal American citizens, would you strongly favor, somewhat favor, somewhat oppose, or strongly oppose this proposal?" (Strongly or somewhat favor: **52%**)